

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION NODS-00

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O 161449Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 6904
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN IMMEDIATE
AEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE 3330
AMEMBASSY JIDDA IMMEDIATE
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV IMMEDIATE
WHITE HOUSE IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 0952

EXDIS DISTRIBUTE AS NODIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PEPR, XF, SY, US
SUBJ: KHADDAM OPPOSES ATHERTON VISIT

REF: (A) DAMASCUS 893 (NOTAL), (B) STATE 38200 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: FONMIN KHADDAM TOLD ME FEBRUARY 15 THAT IT WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE FOR SYRIA TO RECEIVE ATHERTON AT THIS POINT IN TIME BECAUSE HE IS ON A SPECIFIC MISSION LINKED TO THE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI TALKS AND HIS VISITING DAMASCUS WOULD BE MISUNDERSTOOD BY SYRIAN PUBLIC. I URGED HIM TO RECONSIDER.
END SUMMARY.

1. DURING OUR EVENING MEETING FEBRUARY 15, I REVIEWED WITH FONMIN KHADDAM RESULTS OF THE CARTER-SADAT DISCUSSIONS INCLUDING THE WHITE HOUSE STATEMENT FOLLOWING FEBRUARY 8 FINAL MEETING. NOTED THAT LATTER STATMENT SUMMED UP OUR BASIC POSITIONS CONCERNING MAJOR ASPECTS OF NEGOTIATIONS. LAID SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON APPLICABILITY OF 242 TO ALL FRONTS AND NEED TO
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RESOLVE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM IN ALL ITS ASPECTS. STRESSED OUR EFFORTS ARE MOTIVATED BY CONVICTION THAT PARTIAL SOLUTIONS WILL NOT REPEAT NOT ASSURE REGIONAL STABILITY AND PROSPERITY. WE ARE WORKING TO CLARIFY SOME AMBIGUITIES OF EARLIER STATMENTS AND FILL IN 242'S GAP RE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM.

2. KHADDAM THEN COMMENTED HE WAS AWARE THAT ATHERTON WOULD ARRIVE SOON ON A MISSION TO AREA. I CONFIRMED HE PLANNED ARRIVE FEB 20 AND WOULD SPEND NEXT WEEK BETWEEN CAIRO AND JERUSALEM AND THEN POSSIBLY VISIT OTHER ARAB CAPITALS. PREFACING HIS REMARKS WITH OBSERVATION THAT SYRIAN AUTHORITIES HAVE HIGHEST ESTEEM FOR ATHERTON AND ARE KEEN TO SEE CONTACTS WITH USG CONTINUE, FONMIN SAID IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE TO RECEIVE ATHERTON IN DAMASCUS AT THIS POINT IN TIME. KHADDAM NOTED ATHERTON WILL BE TRAVELING "IN THE CONTEXT OF A SPECIFIC MISSION LINKED TO THE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI TALKS WHICH THEMSELVES DERIVE FROM SADAT'S JERUSALEM VISIT." HIS VISITING DAMASCUS WOULD HAVE NOT POINT SINCE SYRIA IS NOT RPT NOT INVOLVED WITH THOSE CONTACTS AND DISAGREES WITH THEIR FRAMEWORK. REITERATING SEVERAL TIMES SYRIA'S RESPECT FOR ATHERTON AND OTHER TOP OFFICIALS FROM WASHINGTON, KHADDAM EMPHASIZED THAT ANY FUTURE MEETINGS CONCERNING THE PEACE PROCESS WOULD HAVE TO BE "IN A DIFFERENT CONTEXT." (COMMENT: AT NO POINT DID HE MAKE CLEAR WHAT CONTEXT WOULD BE ACCEPTABLE.)

3. REPLIED I FOUND THE MINISTER'S POSITION SURPRISING. RECALLED THAT ONLY RECENTLY HE HAD TOLD ME THAT WHAT WE SAID TO THE ISRAELIS AND THE EGYPTIANS WAS OF SECONDARY INTEREST TO HIM BECAUSE WHAT MATTERED TO SYRIA WAS THE ATTITUDE OF THE UNITED STATES TOWARDS THE PEACE PROCESS. ATHERTON WAS COMING TO THE AREA TO EXPLAIN INTER ALIA
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US VIEWS ON HOW WE CAN BEST CONTRIBUTE TO MOVING THE PEACE PROCESS AHEAD. IF THE MINISTER THOUGHT ATHERTON'S VISIT TO DAMASCUS WOULD BE MADE WITH THE INTENT TO TRAY SYRIA INTO NEGOTIATIONS, HE COULD RELAX. THE ANNOUNCED PURPOSE OF ATHERTON'S SHUTTLE BETWEEN CAIRO AND JERUSALEM IS TO INRON OUR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ISRAEL AND EGYPT OVER THE STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES, WHICH WE HOPED WOULD SERVE AS A BASIS FOR CONPREHENSIVE NEGOTIATIONS. BUT EQUALLY IMPORTANT IS ATHERTON'S DESIRE TO EXPLAIN TO ALL PARTIES NOT ONLY HIS EFFORTS WITH EGYPT AND ISRAEL BUT ALWO HOW WE SEE THE ROAD AHEAD.

4. KHADDAM SAID HE WAS NOT SUGGESTING THAT WE WERE TRYING TO ENTRAPE SYRIA, BUT ATHERTON'S ARRIVAL HERE WOULD BE INTERPRETED AS COMING UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF A PROCESS STARTED BY SADAT'S JERUSALEM VISIT. FROM THE BEGINNING SYRIA HAD MADE ITS POSITION CLEAR: IT VIEWED SADAT'S INITIATIVE AS LAUNCHING A PROCESS WHICH SERVED ONLY TO UNDERMINE PROSPECTS FOR A JUST SETTLEMENT. FOR SYRIA TO RECEIVE ATHERTON NOW WOULD IMPLY IT HAD CHANGED ITS OPINION AND WAS PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN "THE SADAT PROCESS." SYRIA DISAGREES CATEGORICALLY WITH THE FRAMWORK OF NEGOTIATIONS

WHICH SADAT'S VISIT HAD HELPED CREATE. SYRIA COULD NOT ISOLATE AN ATHERTON VISIT FROM HIS MISSION OF RESOLVING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ISRAEL AND EGYPT. KHADDAM SAID HE HOPED WE COULD APPRECIATE SYRIA'S POSITION. DAMASCUS HAD ALREADY ADOPTED A SPECIFIC POLITICAL STAND AND WOULD NOT REPAAT NOT WISH TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION TO SYRIAN PUBLIC OPINION THAT IT HAD BACKED AWAY FROM THAT STAND. "NOT ONLY HAS TIME PROVED THE VALIDITY OF OUR POSITION, BUT WE RESPECT THE MENTALITY OF OUR PEOPLE. THAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US AND SADAT. HE PAYS NO HEED TO THE WILL OF THE EGYPTIANS."

5. REPLIED I UNDERSTOOD THE POINT THE MINISTER WAS MAKING BUT DISAGREED WITH HIS REASONING. HE WAS SAYING THAT SYRIA' LEADERSHIP WOULD HAVE A PROBLEM WITH SYRIAN PUBLIC OPINION
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SHOULD ATHERTON COME HERE. FROM MY OWN EXPERIENCE I KNEW THAT SYRIA HAD WAYS TO MAKE AMPLY CLEAR, WHENEVER IT CHOSE, ITS DIFFERENCES WITH AMERICAN POLICY AND WITH THE GENERAL COURSE OF NEGOTIATIONS. WHAT TROUBLED ME WAS THAT KHADDAM WAS REJECTING THE OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW THE STATE OF PLAY WITH ONE OF THE VERY FEW SENIOR OFFICIALS FROM WASHINGTON CAPABLE OF GIVING HIM THE FULL FLAVOR AND NUANCE OF OFFICIAL AMERICAN THINKING ABOUT THE PEACE PROCESS AND THE AMERICAN ROLE THEREIN. NO AMBASSADOR OPERATING AT THE END OF A TELEGRAPH LINE, HOWEVER DETAILED HIS INSTRUCTIONS, COULD HOE TO CONVEY WHAT ATHERTON COUOLD IN A FACE-TO-FACE MEETING WITH ASSAD AND/OR KHADDAM.

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ACTION NODS-00

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /001 W
-----045230 161611Z /41

O 161449Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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AMEMBASSY JIDDA IMMEDIATE

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY TEL AVI IMMEDIATE
WHITE HOUSE IMMEDIATE

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EXDIS DISTRIBUTE AS NODIS

6. KHADDAM RETURNED TO "THE PROBLEMS SYRIA WOULD HAVE WITH ITS PUBLIC OPINION. OUR CITIZENS WILL SAY WE ARE FOLLOWING THE EGYPTIAN LINE AS SADAT HAS BEEN PREDICTING WE WILL DO." I SUGGESTED KHADDAM LOOK AT ISSUES FROM DIFFERENT ANGLE: SYRIANS AND OTHER ARABS MIGHT WELL INTERPRET AHERTON'S NOT VISITING SYRIA AS A LACK OF AMERICAN CONCERN FOR SYRIAN VIEWS. HIS MISSION IS TO TRAVEL IN THE AREA TO ADVANCE ACHIEVEMENT OF A COMPREHENSIVE SETTLEMENT, ONE WHICH SOONER OR LATER MUST INVOLVE SYRIA. KHADDAM DID NOT ADDRESS THIS ARGUMENT DIRECTLY BUT COUNTERED THAT THE SYRIAN POSITION IS CLEAR AND HAS BEEN EXPLAINED MANY TIMES TO US. SYRIA CONTINUES TO BELIEVE THAT THE CURRENT EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI NEGOTIATIONS WILL FAIL. SYRIA HOPES THAT AMERICAN POLICY-MAKERS WILL THEN DEVELOP A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING ABOUT HOW TO PROCEED IN ELABORATING A SUCCESSFUL PEACE PROCESS. DAMASCUS, HE SAID, IS CLOSELY STUDYING ISRAELI POSITIONS AND IS PERSUADED GOI HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY INTRANSIGENT OVER RECENT WEEKS. THIS IS A DIRECT RESULT OF SADAT'S POLICY. REPLIED I FELT HE WAS MISREADING AND OVERSIMPLIFYING
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ISRAELI DEVELOPMENTS. THE GOI HAS ITS OWN PUBLIC OPINION TO CONTEND WITH THE THE EVOLUTION OF ISRAELI POLICY WAS BY NO MEANS OVER.

7. KHADDAM RECALLED THAT SYRIA HAS RECEIVED MANY SENIOR AMERICAN OFFICIALS, THAT ASSAD HAD BEEN DELIGHTED TO MEET CARTER IN GENEVA, AND THE LEADERSHIP HOPES ALL SUCH CONTACTS WILL CONTINUE. I HAS NO INTENTION OF INTERRUPTING THEM. AS FOR MY COMMENT ABOUT THE LIMITATIONS ON THE CONVERSATIONS I AS AMBASSADOR COULD HAVE WITH HIMSELF AND THE PRESIDENT, HE WISHED ASSURE ME THAT OUR TALKS AND THE WRITTEN MESSAGES I HAD BROUGHT HAD ALWAYS CONVEYED US POSITION WITH ACCURACY, HONESTY, AND COMPLETENESS.

8. AT THE END OF OUR CONVERSATION ABOUT THE VISIT, KHADDAM TOLD HIS NOTETAKER HE WANTED GO OFF THE RECORD. HIS ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, HOWEVER, ONLY ELABORATED HIS DESIRE FOR A CLOSE DIALOGUE WITH THE USG AND HIS CONVICTION THAT SYRIAN PUBLIC OPINION WOULD BE CONFUSED BY AN AHERTON VISIT AT THIS TIME. SAID I HOPED HIS POSITION WAS NOT FINAL AND THAT HE WOULD GIVE FURTHER

THOUGH TO RECEIVING ATHERTON. AS I TOOK LEAVE, KHADDAM
ASKED THAT HIS WARMEST GREETINGS BE SENT TO BOTH THE SECRETARY
AND ATHERTON. HE ALSO ASKED SOLICITOUSLY AFTER PHIL HABIB'S
HEALTH AND WAS PLEASED TO HEAR THAT HE WAS BACK AT WORK.

9. COMMENT: IT IS HARD TO SAY WHETHER KHADDAM'S POSITION
REFLECTS ANY UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE PROSPECTS OF SUCCESS
ATHERTON'S MISSION. HE EXUDED CONFIDENCE THAT THE PRESENT
PROCESS IS LIKE A CAR SPEEDING DOWN A DEAD-END STREET TOWARDS
AN INEVITABLE CRASH, BUT THOSE FAMILIAR WITH KHADDAM KNOW HIS
FONDNESS FOR CATEGORIC STATEMENTS AND HOW THEY MAY MASK
OTHER PREOCCUPATIONS. I AM CONVINCED THE PROBLEM
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OVER RECEIVING ATHERTON LIES NOT WITH SYRIAN PUBLIC
REACTION, WHICH ASSAD IS ADEPT AT MANAGING, IT PROBABLY
REFLECTS IN PART CONCERN ABOUT POTENTIALLY ADVERSE REACTIONS
FROM OUTSIDE PARTIES (HE DOESN'T TAKE ME UP ON THIS POINT)
INCLUDING QADDAFI, BOUMEDIENE, THE PALESTINIAN REJECTIONISTS
AND MAYBE EVEN THE SOVIETS.

10. I DID NOT TELL KHADDAM ABOUT MY FEB 14 DISCUSSION
WITH THE PRESIDENT'S PRIVATE SECRETARY CONCERNING ATHERTON'S
VISIT (DAMASCUS 893), NOR DID KHADDAM MENTION IT.
I ASSUME FONMIN'S PRESENTATION REPRESENTS
ASSAD'S DECISION BUT PROPOSE WAITING FOR A DAY OR TWO TO
SEE WHETHER I GET ANY ANSWER FROM THE PRESIDENT'S PRIVATE
SECRETARY. IF NOT I WILL TAKE SOUNDING WITH HIM. ACTION
REQUESTED: ADVISE IF I SHOULD PUSH FURTHER FOR THIS
VISIT AND IF THERE ARE ANY FURTHER ARGUMENTS I SHOULD EMPLOY.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

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